

Historical Note on the Rise and Fall of the Gakkhar Chief Sultan Adam Khan

The Gakkhar chief Sultan Adam Khan is undoubtedly one of the most significant historical figures of the Pothohar. A man of complex character and a product of his circumstances, he became a witness to and a leading participant of extraordinary events that shaped the history of the Pothohar in particular and the Indian subcontinent in general during the first half of the 16th century.

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The Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530) attacked the Pharwala fort in 1519 and succeeded in subjugating the Gakkhar chief Sultan Hathi Khan [1]. After Sultan Hathi Khan's demise, the Gakkhar territory passed on to Sultan Sarang Khan, Sultan Adam Khan's elder brother. A bond of enduring trust and loyalty was formed between the Gakkhars and the Mughal dynasty, which lasted for more than two centuries. This alliance was particularly beneficial to the Gakkhars, who wielded unparalleled influence throughout Pothohar and the adjoining areas during the halcyon days of the Mughal empire.

The Gakkhar chronicle Kaigoharnama presents a vivid overview of the life and times of Sultan Adam Khan but the description stops short of fully highlighting the circumstances that shaped the rather complex and layered personality of the Sultan [2, 3]. In the following paragraphs, I have attempted to analyze the key events that not only led to Sultan Adam Khan's rise but caused his ultimate decline as well. Some of these events had an ineffaceable impact on Sultan Adam Khan's conduct and influenced the decisions and choices he made throughout his life.

Sultan Adam Khan accompanied Babur on his expedition against the Delhi sultanate and either participated in the first battle of Panipat (1526) or the battle of Khanwa (1527). In any of these battles he was wounded in the chest by a spear but later recovered [2-4]. The contribution of Gakkhars to the war effort was acknowledged by the emperor by confirming their possessions in the Pothohar and a further grant of territory in the Jech (Chenhat) doab.

While Sultan Sarang Khan was alive, Sultan Adam Khan participated in managing the affairs of Pothohar being next in line to be the chief of Gakkhars based on the principle of agnatic seniority. In 1538, he was reportedly approached by Malik Kaji Chak, a prominent chieftain of the Chak tribe of Kashmir, for military assistance [5, 6]. Malik Kaji Chak had been engaged in long-drawn tribal struggles with mixed fortune. In the original historical source about this event, Sultan Adam Khan has not been mentioned by name rather a 'sultan' has been referred to as the one who was asked for assistance [5]. Later historians have interpreted this 'sultan' as Sultan Adam Khan based on their analysis of the circumstantial evidence. In all likelihood, the

historical interpretation has confused Sultan Sarang Khan, the incumbent 'sultan' of Gakkhars at that time, with Sultan Adam Khan [5, 6]. Sultan Adam Khan only ascended to the chieftainship of the Gakkhars after 1548 when his brother was captured and executed by the emperor Islam Shah Suri (1507-1554).

The execution of Sultan Sarang Khan and the brutal reprisals directed against his family by Islam Shah Suri forced Sultan Adam Khan to pursue a two-pronged approach in handling the ongoing conflict between the Gakkhars and the Sur dynasty. He initially fought off an army sent against the Gakkhars near the present-day town of Rawat (Islamabad) but in order to avoid further bloodshed, sought a diplomatic settlement and brokered a peace treaty. As part of the terms of the peace agreement, Gakkhars retracted the asylum offered to Haibat Khan Niazi and his followers, who were former allies of the Sur dynasty but fell out of favor when Islam Shah Suri rose to power, and in return the Sur empire ceased its military operations to subdue the Gakkhar territory [2, 3, 7-10]. This respite enabled Sultan Adam Khan to restore the military and political effectiveness of the Gakkhars that was severely dented by years of conflict. In case hostilities resumed, he planned to reengage the Sur empire from a position of relative strength.

Kamran Mirza, the rebellious half-brother of emperor Humayun (1508-1556) after causing much trouble and anguish for the house of Babur, sought refuge with Islam Shah Suri. He felt offended at the emperor's court as he was not treated in a manner befitting a prince and decided to escape. While passing through the Gakkhar territory, he was detained by Sultan Adam Khan, who rushed a messenger to Humayun and invited him to Pothohar to take charge of the disgraced prince. Sultan Adam Khan's messenger was accompanied with a confidant of Kamran Mirza, who conveyed a personal letter from the prince asking for reconciliation. Humayun reciprocated by sending one of his courtiers to reassure Kamran Mirza of his goodwill and to allay any apprehensions of Sultan Adam Khan, who was rightfully concerned about the status of the territory under his control once the emperor marched into Pothohar with a large force. In the winter of 1552-53, Humayun travelled to Pharwala where Kamran Mirza surrendered along with his retinue. Though his life was spared, the prince was blinded and later allowed to proceed on pilgrimage to Makkah. Sultan Adam Khan was rewarded generously for his loyalty and service [8, 11-15].

In 1554-55, Humayun decided to invade India and reclaim his throne. During this time, Sultan Adam Khan was treading a thin line and maintaining a delicate balance of power at the boundaries of the Gakkhar territory. When he was ordered to join the campaign, he wrote a petition to Humayun explaining that he has entered into a peace treaty with the emperor Sikandar Shah Suri (d. 1559), who has taken away his son Lashkari as hostage as a guarantee for assuring that he abides by the treaty. Humayun's courtiers were taken aback by this response

and advised stern action to the emperor. Humayun himself took a more tolerant view of Sultan Adam Khan's request and did not press the matter any further citing the loyalty and earlier services of the Gakkhars. The Mughal era historians especially those employed by the court of the emperor Akbar (1542-1605) derisively noted that Sultan Adam Khan avoided rendering service to the cause of Humayun not including any consideration for the reason the Sultan had presented for doing so and his circumstances [10-13, 15].

After Humayun's accidental death in 1556, Akbar ascended the throne of the Mughal empire. Sultan Adam Khan avoided submitting to the emperor and to offer his allegiance, and delayed a visit to the royal court as long as he could. Even when it became clear that it would be grossly imprudent not to pay homage to the emperor as Akbar was in Lahore in 1557, Sultan Adam Khan asked that a representative of the royal court should come to fetch him. In an extraordinary gesture, this request was granted and a court official either Taimur Khan Jalair or Mullah Abdullah Sultanpuri was deputed for the task [16, 17]. When Sultan Adam Khan was introduced at the court, he was received graciously by the emperor and in a manner appropriate to his pre-eminence as an old and loyal vassal of the Mughal dynasty. A bond of brotherly affection was formed between Sultan Adam Khan and Khan-i-Khanan Bairam Khan, the prime minister (vakil) of the Mughal empire, at this event. Apparently, the issue that Sultan Adam Khan was trying to stay clear of i.e. the claim of Sultan Sarang Khan's eldest son Kamal Khan regarding his hereditary share in the Gakkhar territory came up during this meeting. By this time Kamal Khan was already a prominent mansabdar with considerable influence. A settlement was reached between the two in the presence of the emperor and Sultan Adam Khan departed the royal court [17].

In the following years, Sultan Adam Khan carried on as the semi-independent ruler of the Gakkhar territory. He was actively assisted in managing the affairs of Pothohar and the Gakkhar possessions in the Jech (Chenhat) doab by his son Diwan Lashkari Khan. In the meanwhile, Kamal Khan continued to serve the Mughal empire and kept on advancing in rank ultimately joining the highest cadre of the state officials [18]. In 1562-63, he approached the emperor Akbar with a renewed request for granting him a share in his late father's estates. The emperor acknowledged his services and ordered the splitting of the Gakkhar territory among Sultan Adam Khan and Kamal Khan on an equal basis. When the emperor's decree was communicated to Sultan Adam Khan and his son Diwan Lashkari Khan, they refused to obey. All efforts of mediation aimed at finding a peaceful solution failed and finally the emperor decided to enforce his will through a military action [16]. He ordered Khan-i-Kalan Mir Muhammad Khan, the governor of Punjab to assemble a force and overthrow Sultan Adam Khan [19]. The Mughal army was confronted by the Gakkhars near the village of Helan (Phalia) and a fierce battle took place. The Gakkhars were defeated and Sultan Adam Khan was taken into custody. Diwan

Lashkari Khan managed to escape to the hills of Kashmir. He was pursued and apprehended and both father and son were handed over to Kamal Khan. Diwan Lashkari Khan was executed as a rebel leader but Sultan Adam Khan's life was spared most likely due to his stature and advanced age. To remove Sultan Adam Khan from public eye and to emasculate his influence, it was decided to imprison him for life. Kamal Khan took over Pothohar from the nobles who had assisted him to subdue Sultan Adam Khan and the Gakkhar territory transitioned from a quasi-independent domain within the Mughal empire to a subordinate one. Immediately after his victory, Sultan Kamal Khan rushed to the capital Agra to pay his respects to the emperor Akbar [14-17, 20, 21]. It is likely that Sultan Adam Khan was taken along as well as his presence in his former chiefdom would have been imprudent. Sultan Adam Khan passed away while incarcerated under the watchful eye of his victorious nephew.

Sultan Adam Khan's descendants suffered in the aftermath of his downfall. But they bounced back in a manner as phenomenal as the decline of their progenitor. His grandson Jalal Khan Gakkhar distinguished himself in the service of the emperor Akbar and received the parganah of Dangali as fief in lieu of compensation for his appointment as a mansabdar. He was bestowed the title of 'sultan' as well and rose to great fame as one of the most powerful Gakkhar chiefs during the last part of the reign of the emperor Akbar and the early part of the reign of the emperor Jahangir (1569-1627). He died fighting in a campaign on behalf of the Mughal empire in the Kabul subah [1, 2]. Sultan Jalal Khan was successful in establishing his legacy on such a firm footing that for at least six generations following his demise, the majority of the parganahs of Pothohar and adjoining areas under the control of Gakkhars were held as fiefs by the descendants of Sultan Adam Khan [20].

Sultan Adam Khan is a remarkable historical character. Unlike his elder brother who was a straightforward soldier and a freedom fighter, Sultan Adam Khan was calculating and diplomatic. This statesmanlike behavior is what enabled him to survive the onslaught of the Sur empire on the Gakkhar territory yet he failed to adapt to the changed circumstances once the Mughal dynasty was restored. His triumph and his failings, and the complexity of his thought and action is what makes him interesting to the modern historian.

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